demo

the hart house music magazine

19th Edition

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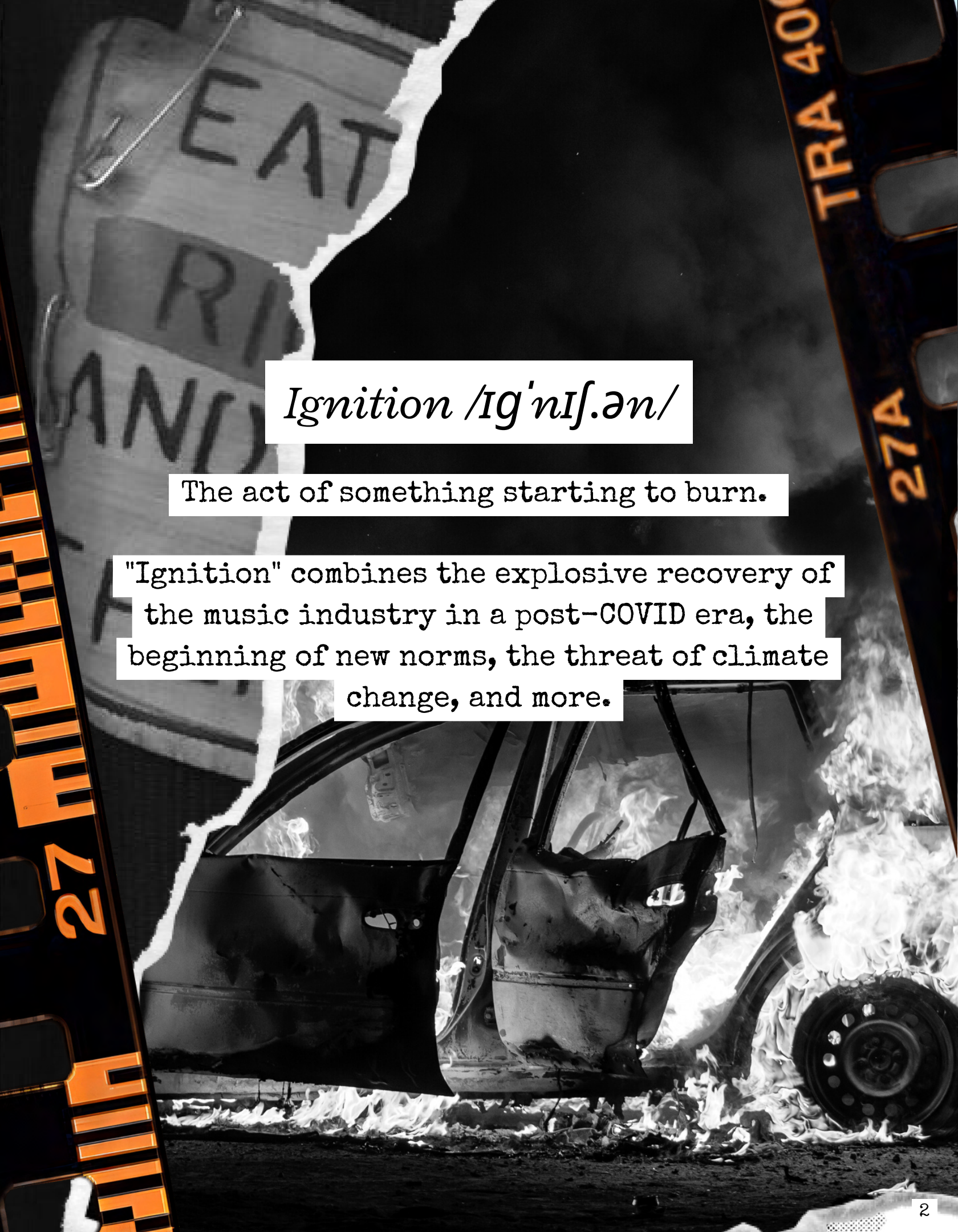

Ignition /ɪgˈnɪʃ.ən/

The act of something starting to burn.

"Ignition" combines the explosive recovery of the music industry in a post-COVID era, the beginning of new norms, the threat of climate change, and more.

andrew's co-editor statement

Wow... We did it. After being graciously thrusted into the role of co-editor during the Winter semester, I never expected any of this. Behind this print issues is newly formed and strengthen bonds that will never break. It is not only the Ignition of music but community, the reinvigorated feeling of belonging.

After the first two years of online classes utterly decimating my will to socialize, DEMO have reignited my passion for writing and designing, and reminded me that opportunity is everywhere. You just have to chase it.

Thank you so much Aya and Nick for entrusting me and being the bestest friends <3. Thank you to our talented writers and designers for their thoughtful meditation on Ignition. Thank you to Nicole, Demi, Ethan, and all of HHSMC for being a superb support net! And, as cheesy as it is, thank you, the reader, for allowing us to do what we do!

Long live the Yoo-Kobayashi Dynasty,

Andrew Yoo (3rd-year)

aya's co-editor statement

If I'm being completely honest, becoming the co-editor of a university-level music magazine with almost two-ish years in my vegetative, bedridden, and chronically online state was something I was never going to be ready for. I felt unprepared, undeserving, and utterly unqualified for the position—which was worsened with my terrible time management skills.

In a way, this magazine tested and challenged my patience, grit, sociability, self-esteem, and non-existent leadership skills. Throughout all the times I've cried about my insecurities over the success of this issue, I can't help but smile at the fact that it's finally here—and I wouldn't have been able to do it without Nick and Andrew, who I now have the privilege to call my lifelong best friends.

Now that we're here, flipping through the physical pages of an issue I've spent so much of my lack of free time on, I just wanted to give a warm and heartfelt shoutout to all the writers, designers, external entities, the Hart House Music Committee, Hart House as a whole, and of course, you, dear readers, for trusting both Andrew and I with such a large task. We wouldn't have been able to pull it off without all your support and encouragement.

I also wanted to take the time to thank Eram and Marina, the lovely co-editors of the 2021-2022 term, who entrusted me with this role. I hope I did both of you justice with "Ignition," and I hope I can make you two proud with this one. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to do what I love and to rekindle my broken relationship with music in an otherwise hellish environment of constant studying and tanking GPAs.

Rule Yoo-Kobayashi, rule UofT

Aya Kobayashi (3rd Year)

P.S., Ethan, thank you so much for dealing with me as I vented and stressed out about DEMO. Honestly, I don't think I could've done it without you.

FREE $TYLE

New York's Scam Rap King

Tommy V.I wears a CELINE LVMH cap and Chrome Hearts designer tee as he loads into the zoom interview. Bought at retail prices, the two items would cost just over 1,700 CND. But how much did Tommy pay?

August 2019: America withdraws from a nuclear arms treaty, the Dow Jones crashes by 500 points, and a niche subgenre of Detroit rap music surges in popularity. The subgenre is "scam rap" and it blows up because it is catchy, shameless, and incredibly funny. Detroist artists Teejayx6 and Kasher Quon headline, rapping about swindling barbers, robbing NBA players, and punching little kids. Scam rap is like your drunk uncle's rant about Albanian hookers: Weird, crass, out of pocket, but so entertaining you can't stop listening.

But back to the CELINE cap and designer tee. On secondhand luxury clothing resale platform Grailed we find again the exact cap and tee worn by Tommy in the interview, this time for sale under an account named [redacted]. [redacted] boasts a 4.9 star rating with 230 listed transactions since 2016. The avatar is a grainy photo of a baseball cap with the Apple logo, a reference to 'Steve Frauds' — a favourite internet alias of Tommy's. With 81 current listings and an estimate of 500$ per item, there's at least 40,000$ in authenticated designer goods listed on [redacted]'s page at the time of writing. The question is: *How does Tommy V.I afford all of this?*

Tommy V.I is a bit of a modern day renaissance man: a rapper, a businessman, a videographer, an investor and a salesman all in one. Above all he's a man with his ways of getting money (scammers would call them 'methods'). But it wasn't always this way, things only started to change for Tommy and his family around 2019-2020.

"Yeah I was always making money, but the thing is I had a pretty bad drug problem, that's why I could never save money. I grew up poor and starting from around covid, family was a little bit struggling, so that's when I found out about methods and all that shit that I rap about. I was just sick of being broke and I ran that shit up. I remember at some point I had a 30-40k credit limit (allegedly)."

Tommy's first methods were crude.

"I had a couple of my boys who were already into that shit. I got into Telegram groups, really just started talking to a lot of people. I knew about swiping*, right? But my very first thing was a Paypal load (allegedly). They would hack Paypals and get the passwords and shit and you would just log in, send yourself money, and then close the account. Like a rack or something. I did it once or a couple times (allegedly)."

The method didn't stick.

"I was like nah, this isn't my lane. It didn't feel right, you're literally taking, just robbing people. I like to think I have a little more of a conscience when it comes to that, so my main thing now—i'm sure you hear it in my music—all these big companies, that was my lane. Without getting too into it, let's say if Walmart loses 10k, it's not gonna hurt them. They're not gonna close down the next day, they're not a mom and pop shop. That I can sleep at night doing, I don't treally give a shit. Most of the scam rappers, they're swiping. I mean I guess if you do a (Paypal) dispute and shit the bank takes the L , but still. It doesn't feel right. I like to think I have a little more of a conscience."

*Scamming slang for methods involving stolen ('swiped') credit card numbers

Much of the money Tommy makes now goes to his rap career, a natural next step for Tommy who describes himself as having grown up a "rap nerd".

"Music was always something I was interested in, I went to Brooklyn Tech and that was pretty close to Joey Bada$$'s highschool. I remember in the lunchrooms they would play the Survival Tactics music video. Back then you'd see kids doing music videos all the time, so I didn't think much of it until he got on XXL. I saw him in real time go from a nobody to up, and I thought: Shit, I could do that too!"

Tommy has a plan for how he's gonna blow up with his next album.

"I'm kind of strategic. First, I gotta get my money straight cause I kind of got wrecked by crypto. I'm hoping that I play this year quite well, once I do that I'll have 100k on the side for a marketing project and features. Whatever I did before, that's nothing compared to what I got planned. I just got wrecked by crypto, I won't even lie bro. I'm probably down like a quarter mil on that shit, so right now I'm just stacking tracks. Once it's go time, it's gonna be a crazy rollout."

Tommy V.I flashing his receipts, still taken from the music video for "Cashout Artist ft. Teejayx6"

As for the Grailed account with the designer, this is what Tommy had to say:

"Uhhh. Those are real clothes. But. It's, it's... I don't buy clothes. Last time I bought actual stuff from retail was maybe four years ago. Yeah. So, you can probably connect the dots on that."

Follow Tommy V.I

Tiktok	@youngyangofficial	Instagram	@boostmastertommy
Youtube	@youngyangofficial	Spotify & Apple	@Tommy V.I

MUSICAL MOLOTOVS: REJOICE IN YOUR REVOLUTION

NICHOLAS LEIPER

A song that is written in, used during a, consumed by those who wish to, or interpreted to be in, protest of a given social or political issue.

The 5th song on ***Killer Mike's*** 2011 EP, ***P13dge***, is standard political tract. "Burn" seemingly parodies the idea of non-violence in the face of police repression and a post-2008 capitalist hellscape. Its message is simple enough:

"Me, I suggest you get yourself a shotgun / so when they come to evict you can make 'em run." It is one of many calls, literal or metaphorical, to "burn this motherfucker down."

"Burn" is not done justice without its context. Released a few months after the cop who shot Oscar Grant got off scot free, it captures the righteous outrage felt by Black Americans and those wise masses who hate the police. It is a song written in the face of a broken system and, in my opinion, a textbook protest song. Unfortunately, that textbook is rather hard to define.

A quick flip through RadioX's "The 50 Greatest Protest Songs" leaves us with a dizzying array of Nu Metal, Punk, Folk, Pop-rock, Rap, Funk, Pop-Punk and more. The waters are only muddied further when one reads other equivalent compilations. In a maddened stupor, I consulted the "Protest Song" entry on *Wikipedia* and found no satisfying answer. The unhelpful definition I have arrived at is:

The fact of the matter is, protest music isn't a genre. It's more of a human phenomenon. People are angry and generally appreciative of the organized noise we call music. Eventually, the two are bound to interact. Instead of offering anything resembling a comprehensive history, I'd invite readers to consider two brands of 'protest song' through this article. The first being music that epitomizes a burning car - musical fuck-yous and adagios in anarcho-minor. The latter being those careful subversions that can unify and shape a movement.

THE FUCK YOUS

Months after the '92 Rodney King Riots, Rage Against the Machine released the now legendary "Killing in the Name of". Perhaps best known for the refrain "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me", the track comes in at #6 on Rolling Stone's list of top protest songs of all time and comes up on almost every other list of protest songs I've come across. Nearly every song on that album is a protest song in its own right. Its messaging is radical and revolutionary despite the gross irony in the comfortable millions it netted the band of supposed socialists.

Still, I want to take a moment to recognize the immense power an album like ***Rage Against the Machine*** had. It is probably the most radical, unapologetically commie-rock to ever reach the kind of commercial success it did - perhaps a sign of a time when the Zapatistas had taken Chiapas and when unadulterated liberal hegemony was being questioned.

More recently, ***IDLES*** has emerged with a radical message. In 2019, the iconic British post-punkers took to the stage of the Downs Festival and introduced each track by making it clear that they were "antifascist songs". In 2023, they were nominated for a Grammy which somehow found its way into Ozzy Osbourne's 74-year old hands. Still, one of the biggest rock-bands of our day have gone on record as "lefty and soft."

Bands like ***IDLES*** capture what is a perhaps a distinctly contemporary malaise with the trite politics of self-identified radicals. I don't think I'm alone in resonating with Nadia C's "Your Politics are Boring as Fuck." The simple fact of the matter is, we as a generation can look back upon the cooption and failure of nearly every radical movement that came before us. It's fucking exhausting. The problems are all the same, but the playbook is exhausted.

IDLES' 2018 ***Joy as an Act of Resistance*** in many ways answer Nadia's call to make to make politics and protest joyous. Sure, it's a furious album that takes no prisoners with its pugilistic vocal delivering, pounding drums, and wailing guitar tones, but it's also pretty far from self-serious or aggrandizing. It is simply a piece of media anyone can put on to help get themselves through their days and it's made by a couple of British weirdos, jumping around in their underwear.

MUSIC AS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT.

The word revolutionary carries a handful of aesthetic and political connotations. For me, it's the image of a protestor, probably in black bloc, with a molotov cocktail. They take that signature petrol bomb pitcher stance as they hurl it towards a riot line—any photographer's dream shot. But really, the word can and should mean so much more than that. In a society where everything, including the very act of protest, is commodified (thank the Jenner x Pepsi collab for that one), sometimes the most revolutionary thing you can do is be earnest and exist in a community intentionally.

Modern life under capitalism is a series of atomizing rituals beginning with the facsimiles of social interaction fabricated by the likes of Zuckerburg and Musk, and ending somewhere between a job interview and a retirement that may never come for some of our generation.We live isolated lives and force ourselves to perform as students, employees, and even friends and families. This performance extends to the point where we perform to ourselves. We try and train our brains like Pavlov's dog, foaming at the mouth for cheap serotonin and conformity.

"I should like this movie."
"I should listen to this song."

When I started this article, I had written about 500 words on the history of Appalachian coal miner's union songs. I talked about the Coal Wars, the Battle for Blair Mountain, and the musical tradition that accompanied it. After all, "There is Power in Our Union." Certainly, it's protest music, but it feels limiting to cap it there. In a world of constant performance, music offers us a unique opportunity to be vulnerable. We should embrace it.

Music is one of the most human things we can do. When surrounded by systems that seek to dehumanize, whether that be coercive apparatus of the state or even a shitty boss at your 9 to 5, playing and listening allow us to assert our own humanity. In the words of the late great **John Coltrane**: "You can play a shoestring if you're sincere."

All music can be protest music in a world like ours. There's always something to be outraged about and something to break down over. What really matters isn't what some guy in a University of Toronto music magazine tells you it is, it's what helps you through the complex task of existing in the 21st century. It's barely a question of politics or protest. It's a question of joy or misery.

Note**: The song "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizket is the culmination of Mountain Dew's marketing efforts and the military industrial complex. Thus it shall never be a protest song.* ***Fuck you, Fred.

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Musical Molotvs... On Playing with...

Track Listing

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Discussion

Virtual Listening vs. Analog Engagement: Which is Better? Music

9

Two Approaches to Listening to Music

Writer **Hayden Zahary**

I've noticed something of a trend among music fans of an older, slightly less 'terminally online' generation than our own. When they talk about music that's important to them, they tend to list off a lot of specifically local artists. In my case—thanks to where I live—it's a lot of Toronto artists, and, more broadly, Canadian ones. I'm usually forced to admit that I have no idea who any of these people are. With what I assume must be a sheepish expression on my face, I have to shake my head and say that I don't know anything about these local heroes.

Having had a few interactions like this, I started thinking about the origins of this generation gap. It seems pretty clear to me that it stems from the enormous differences in the ways that music (and media more broadly) made its way to these people when they were our age and how it makes its way to me right now. Obviously, it's the internet. For us, music listening is constrained only by the languages we know and how much time we're willing to spend, while members of these older generations were beholden to what information could physically reach them in the place that they lived. As somebody who "got into music" around 2016-2017, my listening was always mediated by the internet. After the music industry was forced to operate entirely online for two years, the revived interest in live music and physical media has been quite powerful, and I think that makes it particularly interesting to compare how the digital and physical approaches differ.

The first difference that I've noticed is in the way that finding music through online spaces affects the sense of community. Virtually all the music I've listened to of my own accord has been through services like Youtube or Spotify. A significant amount of it has been due to these sites' recommendation algorithms, and even when I was finding stuff 'manually'—it was through the internet. I've trawled through Reddit threads, scoured lists of bands' influences from Wikipedia, dug through the archives of Pitchfork et al., and most of all, I've spent far too much on the website RateYourMusic. These are all relatively abstract ways of finding music. In these contexts, my role is as an anonymous internet browser who could be just about anyone in the world.

However, for those whose musical experiences were bound by the physical world, what they listened to was more dependent on where they went and where they lived. If you were learning about a band from someone you talked to—from finding something in a record store or going to a

concert—your concrete presence was part of the experience. There were music magazines and radio stations, but these only reached as far as the postal service or their antennas could carry them. Inevitably, your taste would end up geographically limited compared to what someone like me could have, but it seems to me that this gives you a greater sense of community. Certainly, when I watch interviews with musicians, this comes out a lot. Most musicians will mention some obscure band from their hometown who has a legendary status for them, and who they usually knew personally or at least saw live a million times. This real-world-based music community is what lets you become part of a 'scene'. Obviously, people who are active about going out and getting involved with music still have these things, but I've never felt particularly in touch with any scene with my individualistic and virtual pursuit of music.

In addition to the effects it can have on taste and community, specific online communities can also have impacts on the terms that we think about music in a broad sense. I'm going to look at RateYourMusic (invariably referred to by its users as RYM) for one example, as it's the site I've used the most. It's essentially a giant encyclopaedia of musical releases, where users of the site can catalogue and rate music. Based on an algorithm that takes into account the overall average rating combined with the number of ratings the album has received, it's assigned a place in a massive overall chart. These charts are the website's standout feature—you can simply go to the charts tab on the website and pull it up, and there you have the official RYM list of the best albums of all time. You can also filter the chart by a number of different factors, so you can generate a chart of the best albums of 2022, the best albums of 1981, the best emo albums of all time, etc.

When you look at an artist's page, the albums which rank high enough on the list (according to another algorithm) show up with their titles in bold. Both the chart and the status of being 'bolded' confer an album with its level of prestige on the site. In high school and more recently, I have listened to a lot of albums based on this site's opinions of them. The community has a particular taste which is usually concordant with mine and I've found a lot of music I love from these recommendations—but, like I said, the website's community very much has its own own particular taste, and the way the website is programmed affects the way that discourse around music functions there.

The way that RYM works implies a hierarchical, almost a mathematical way of thinking about music.

Every album has a ranking on a chart—be it the overall one or a more specific one—and while using the website, you'll probably be inclined to base your listening around what's high up on the chart. Any artist you get introduced to can instantly be quantified by going to their artist page on the site to see what the verdict of the redoubtable crowd is. The whole rating-based system pushes you to think about music on a five-star scale of quality, which might discourage more complex thinking about the merits and failings of what you're listening to or the kinds of different emotional effects different songs can have.

Though RYM is the site that I personally have used, I'm sure that any other platform one might look to for discovering things to listen to has its own functions, influencing its discourse in its own particular way. Looking at the inner workings of RYM, you can see how the structures which have been hardcoded into the site shape the kinds of conversations that happen on it. These kinds of concrete, numbered lists and scores don't exist in the real world! Weighing the pluses and minuses of a work in the imperfect dynamics of human interaction is very different from throwing up a review behind a username or choosing a rating on a slider.

The internet has had an awful lot of benefits for music fans, ones which are mostly obvious. We can access infinite amounts of music and information about music for free (or nearly for free, at least). People who live in rural areas where there might be no audience for the music they love can access people to talk to about, and hear stuff that might otherwise never make its way to them. These are great things, and if music is merely a solitary hobby for you, one enjoyed alone in a bedroom with headphones on, the digital approach to music listening is perfect. Certainly, I'm that kind of solitary music listener to some degree, and I'm sure I'll keep on listening to old and esoteric shit I find on the internet.

But I also feel the benefits of the opposite, real-life-based approach. I've played music in a band with other people and I've been to concerts, and the sense of community that those activities give you is something that I think is legitimately special and valuable. That's not something that I have ever gotten as a withdrawn listener. I'll admit to being somewhat jealous of the sense of direct, personal involvement with music that those who grew up in earlier decades have. With the industry in a new, post-COVID phase and everything that comes with that being the theme of the article, perhaps now might be the ideal time to consider the differences between these two approaches.

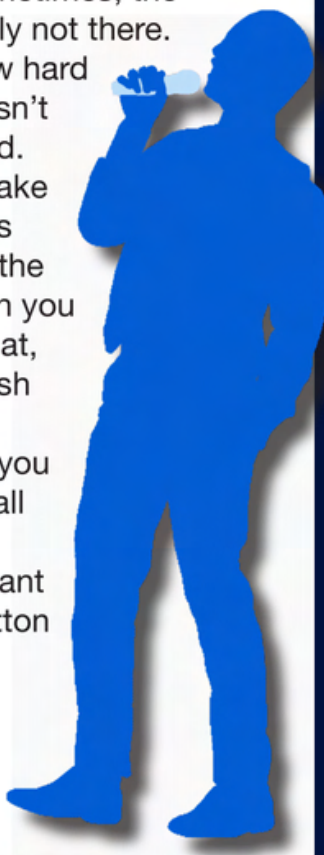
On PLAYING With FEEL

Murat Diken

Anyone who has played an instrument can relate to the feeling of 'flow'. Whatever you choose to call this feeling, we can all agree it certainly feels magical. A spectacular moment where the music completely enchants and transforms you into a different realm where everything else ceases to exist. The following lyrics from the French nu-disco band L'Impératrice sheds some light on what I mean by this feeling:

But wait a minute
I feel something in my knees
Is it music or new voodoo?
Can I resist this?
Am I off my head, what's shaking my hips?
Can I resist this?
It's the kind of beat I just can't dismiss

However, everyone who has played an instrument can also agree that sometimes, the magic is simply not there. No matter how hard you try, it doesn't sound as good. Maybe you make small mistakes and can't get the perfectionist in you to embrace that, maybe you rush or fall behind. Just like how you seem to lose all your musical ability the instant the record button is clicked.



Not surprisingly, many musicians experience this and they have chosen to name it the "Red Light Syndrome" (has nothing to do with Amsterdam, I swear). I am not claiming to be an expert on this issue by any means, however, I did some exploration on what was keeping me from unleashing my full potential. The answer is stupidly simple, but keep in mind that it does not provide a solution to all of your musical problems.

When I was trying to record a section of a song that I am working on I wanted to get it perfect. Free of any kind of error, on the beat. The more I struggled to get it perfect, the worse it seemed to get. It was like sinking in quicksand. Just as I was about to call it a day, I wanted to record one last time, but without any expectations of perfection. So I clicked on record, closed my eyes, and just listened to what I was playing and listened to what I was hearing in my head, what I wanted to play.

There were still mistakes here and there, but instead of looking at them like they were acts of blasphemy, I chose to see my mistakes (the acceptable ones at least) as adding personality to the song.

So, what am I blabbering on about? The point I am trying to make is about thought. Our thoughts keep our musical abilities under a leash. Instead of enjoying the music we're making, we get lost in thoughts about what we are playing and fail to listen, fail to feel.

And I don't mean that theory is not important, that you don't need scales, or you don't need to keep up with the tempo. These are all parts of what makes music great, but they are for practice time. Any musician's goal should be to internalize these so that we can speak the language of music, not spell it out.

Not thinking can be tough at the beginning because it requires focus, and our attention spans have been going downhill thanks to the technology that makes our lives so much easier. However, think of the time that you are playing your instrument as a moment that is meant only for you and music. Only focus on the sounds and the sensations of spending time with your instrument and feel the joy of igniting the fire within.

Illustrations by Jeleena Johnson

The Unseen Women of Hip-Hop

By Ahsen Bhatti

Hip-Hop has been declared the **most popular genre of music** on the United States Billboard charts, overtaking other mainstream genres with new hits and superstars being created on an almost daily basis. However, this hip-hop is vastly different from the hip-hop of the 70s and 80s, a derided and persecuted genre in its birthplace of New York. Never escaping that local sphere without the dedication and resilience of early hip-hop pioneers such as DJ Kool Herc, Rakim, and Grandmaster Flash. This generally accepted narrative surrounding the genre's rise to prominence ignores the contributions made by women at every step. Without which, it is unlikely such dominance over the music industry could have **EVER** been achieved.

The late Sylvia Robinson, aka the "Mother of Hip-Hop", was a producer and singer who founded Sugar Hill Records, producing one of the first-ever hip-hop records, "Rappers Delight" in 1980. As a mold for the era's future records, the single improved the image of the genre beyond live performances to a new **enterprise** that can be **monetized** by record labels.

Robinson later went on to produce "The Message" with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the **template** for conscious hip-hop records and one of rap's first **significant** introspective on current societal affairs. The song references the plight of a woman who has been forced to live in conditions of squalor and prostitution due to an inability to support herself

Despite the societally relevant and provoking content of the song, the rarity of such content in hip-hop exposes a common issue with the portrayal of women in hip-hop; while women's issues are highlighted in songs such as "the Message," "Brenda's Got a Baby" by Tupac Shakur, and Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)," in the **majority** of hip hop songs, they are portrayed as little more than objects. **Trailblazing** female MCs such as MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliot, Lauryn Hill, and Erykah Badu carved out their own lane of hip-hop centered around **confidence**, **success**, and **gaining independence** in a male-dominated field. Unfortunately their efforts were overlooked by many in a larger cultural context, but the **tenacity** and **passion** displayed by these early innovators laid the groundwork for future female rapper to **maintain** their **sphere of influence** in the cultural mainstream.

At the turn of the millennium, hip hop was in a precarious position, but managed to evolved to accommodate new talents such as Grammy nominated artists Remy Ma and M.I.A. 2007 saw the rise to prominence of a **vibrant** and **spirited** new artist, Trinidadian-born Nicki Minaj, who was defined by her **energetic** flows and use of multiple **distinct cadences**. Her verse on Kanye West's 2010 song, "Monster" was a defining moment for the year, with Pitchfork describing it as "masterfully manic" and The New York Times calling it "legendary." The song also featured rap heavyweights such as Jay-Z, Rick Ross, and Kanye West, which signified and established Nicki Minaj as living proof that female rappers **can** outshine their male peers when provided the opportunity. With the support of established acts including Lil Wayne and his label Young Money, Minaj capitalized on the success of "Monster," becoming **the first female rapper** to perform at Yankee Stadium and receiving her first Grammy nomination later that year.

Minaj was the first in a new era of female rappers, who were not simply content with sharing the stage with male emcees, but preferred **dominating** over the genre and including themselves in conversations for the **greatest rapper of all time** instead of settling for the greatest female rapper. She **solidified** herself as the leader of a new generation with her chameleonic styles, allowing her to fit in alongside other popular new talents of the 2010s such as Drake, Big Sean, and Future. In spite of her **accomplishments** and **barrier-breaking** performances in hip-hop, Nicki Minaj has attempted to prevent other female rappers from rising to her levels of fame due to a fear of losing her place in a competitive category. However, with the passage of time, Minaj has changed her tone. Most contemporary popular female rappers **share** the stage and do their best to foster an atmosphere of **support** and **healthy** competition.

Another notable contemporary female rapper who, while not reaching the commercial peaks of Nicki Minaj, has accumulated **critical acclaim** of her own with her **unique** blend of conscious hip hop, jazz, and boom bap, is Rapsody. Making her debut on **legendary** producer 9th Wonder's The Dream Merchant Vol. 2, Rapsody quickly made a name for herself through **thoughtful** lyricism that **uplift** black women. Her profile rose on a national stage with her verse on Kendrick Lamar's award-winning 2015 album To Pimp a Butterfly, where she advocated for the erasure of colorism in American society. She continued the legacy of predecessors by making socially conscious music blended with personal narratives, which has gained her the respect of her peers and a key position in hip-hop culture, which she considers to be something that must be held in high esteem.

The advent of social media and its intersection with the music industry has cleared **new pathways** for upcoming artists who previously only had limited access through labels for achieving the mainstream success they desired. Genre-defining artists of the past two decades such as Eminem, Kanye West, Drake, and Future have been able to have an indelible **impact** on the culture and laid down a **foundation** upon which subsequent rappers can further build Hip-hop's relevance and diverse legacy. The genre has exploded into a number of popular subgenres, with innovative female talent present in each of them. Feminism has affected hip-hop in waves, giving artists like Cardi B, Doja Cat, and Lizzo a **strong hold** over modern

pop rap, expressing similar ideals to previous legends through **independence** and owning one's **sexuality**. Along with this smaller but equally talented female hip-hop artists like noname and Che Noir have gained prominent profiles in Chicago jazz rap and boom bap respectively, which are predominately male subgenres of rap

Rapid progress has been made in the past decade in furthering the profile of female MCs, due to the admirable dedication of women throughout the genre. Music being utilized as an outlet for frustration of being relegated to a side role in the industry. They have **refused** to allow themselves to be considered as of a lesser standing compared to male MCs, and display a **nuanced** perspective into the world around us which often goes ignored. There is still work to be done with giving female rappers the laurels they deserve, but there is a **vast** field of **emerging** talents from whom insightful and well-crafted work can be looked forward to soon..

Article by Violet
Design by Adela Hua

IN CASUAL CONVERSATIONS about music, people point to specific genres. "I like rock and rap" or "I only listen to Canadian post-punk" — these can be really enlightening responses; however, often these discussions often lead into a rut of "I'll listen to anything except country." It is overwhelming to consider how small the portion of music we listen to is compared to the vast amounts of music that exists, but somehow country music always gets the short end of the stick. I will admit I have been tempted to outspokenly hate country music due to the negative connotations of enjoying it. However, there is a depth to the genre that I think is worth exploring, and discussing with a critical, yet open mind.

Country music doesn't always have the greatest reputation and for some valid reasons. Today you can turn on any Country station and hear a sound strikingly similar to the non-descript top-100 hit that you hear walking into a mall. Beer, babes, pickup trucks, and a side of questionable roots in American history seem to be the common motifs brought to mind whenever Country is mentioned. But there is so much untapped potential behind Country's complicated history that makes the genre wholly unique.

The history and development of country music cannot be separated from that of the history of slavery in America, or rapid industrialization. At the core of blues and folk, there is a sense of yearning, a calling for more. From the Banjo and its origins in the transatlantic slave trade, to it being mainly enjoyed as a 'working-class genre,' Country presents a much larger discussion surrounding the conditions and struggles of blue-collar workers. There is no doubt of the influence of historical struggles contained in the emergence of country music.

For instance, Woody Guthrie, a remarkable American singer-songwriter most well known for "This Land is your Land." The story goes that the track was written in response to "God Bless America" to criticize its blind patriotism. Some may categorize his music as more Folk than Country; however, throughout his tenured career, Guthrie's influence as a politically motivated singer-songwriter illustrates the depth that the public has disassociated with Country. Guthrie's work was not about patriotism, trucks, or faceless women at the bar, it was focused around anti-fascism, anti-segregation, and the experience of the American working class.

With Guthrie's anti-establishment sentiments in mind, you might be wondering, what changed? How has Country become associated with vastly different ideals than the humble, grassroots ethos it was founded upon?

Like anything in the music world, money played a large role. The invention of phonographs created a divide in music accessibility and allowed the presiding tunes to, unfortunately, be used for the cause of the Confederate States in the Civil War. Racism became consciously incorporated into the lyricism not only to appeal to the Southern States but to erase Black influence. It came to the point where Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motors, even held a country music festival that forbade any Black musicians from playing, recentering the Country narrative around whiteness.

A blatant example would be Lesley Riddle, a Country pioneer who shaped the genre in the roaring twenties but is often lost to time due to being a disabled African-American. He mentored the Carter Family musicians, a renowned Country family band in the 1930s, by shaping their lyricism, musicianship, and guitar technique. Riddle was influenced by his spirituality and invested it into the Carters' success, composing many songs for the family. Lesley's memory is preserved in his hometown of Burnsville, NC through the annual "RiddleFest."

"Was a high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property,
But on the back side it didn't say nothing -
God blessed America for me.
[This land was made for you and me]"

(From the original lyrics of "This Land is Your Land"
by Woody Guthrie)

Further down the line, country music culminated into a commercial enterprise with the divide between Country and Pop dissolving. It is fair to say that although there are many more types of Country today, its roots seem to have been lost in a cloud of forced Southern twang and generic progressions.

> "Get up, rounder, let a working man lay down
> Get up, rounder, let a working man lay down
> You are a rounder, but you're all out and down"
>
> (From "Hello Stranger" by the Carter Family, transmitted by Lesley Riddle)

Nevertheless, it does not take away from the many artists today producing Country that is, well, tolerable to the ears. Like any genre, Country is not for everyone, but its associated sound and history have disproportionately become misunderstood in the past few decades. It's disheartening to see people act like it is a style of music far removed from indie, folk, and rock.

"EVERYTHING BUT, country

In the spirit of reexamining Country, here are some artists that got me to love the genre:

Sturgill Simpson:

For those who like a traditional Country with a sprinkle of rock and jazz, Simpson incorporates the outlaw style with contemporary ideas. It's refreshing to hear some fiddle and banjo on his tracks, it's something you could get up and line-dance to.

Golden Smog:

A lesser-known alternative Country group from Minneapolis. They operate as a dynamic, collaborative group with a constantly changing lineup, allowing for a blend of bluegrass, folk, rock and Country.

Orville Peck:

This one should be common knowledge but come on, Orville Peck is a fantastic example of Country evolving into something new and exciting. In this case, with elements of rock and shoegaze. Plus, who doesn't like a man of mystery?

Allison Russel:

With an impactful voice and gospel influence, this Canadian's music is almost impossible to dislike. From Americana to folk to Country, her music is authentic and timeless.

The Cactus Blossoms:

For the indie kids, this group composed of brothers has put out some great tracks that are very laid back, yet carry on an american Country and folk tradition.

Kacey Musgraves:

Her six Grammys speak for themselves. For a more spacey vibe, this is your gal. The Country influence is clear, yet lovingly incorporated into pop-y trends sought after by youth.

Music Finds a Way: Talking Harmonix and Campus Unity with the Past and Present of UTM's Music Clubs

Maaz Ahtesham

As clubs scrambled to maintain some level of activity amidst the lockdown, the University of Toronto Mississauga Campus' music clubs struggled in maintaining activity. Unlike other clubs that could move their operations online without a hitch, there was no way for the UTM Music Club and Harmonix to facilitate that process. For starters, they could not access any of their in-person facilities and equipment, and anyone who's tried to jam online knows it just does not work. So, for the better part of two years, the music scene at UTM could be represented by a black CB Drum kit collecting dust inside a Student Centre office, undisturbed. Once pandemic restrictions were lifted, Harmonix's new iteration stepped up.

Though the pre-pandemic music clubs at UTM are dead, it is still possible to preserve its history through stories about their experiences. These clubs weren't just extracurriculars, but they were bolstering communities, enjoyed by students and faculty members alike. To both preserve history and fill the gaps in the long and winding story that took UTM music enthusiasts to purgatory and back, I decided to pursue these stories through those that created these experiences both for themselves and others. I interviewed executives from both versions of Harmonix to find the past, present, and future of music at UTM.

To gain perspective on Harmonix's past, I spoke to Nicholas Tessier: an alumni who graduated from UTM in 2021. As a student, Nicholas was a member of both the UTM Music Club and Harmonix before becoming an administrator in the latter's Discord server after the pandemic had shut down in-person events. As a pianist, guitarist, and vocalist, Nicholas began his involvement with Harmonix in fall of 2018, though he'd been jamming out on campus a bit before that.

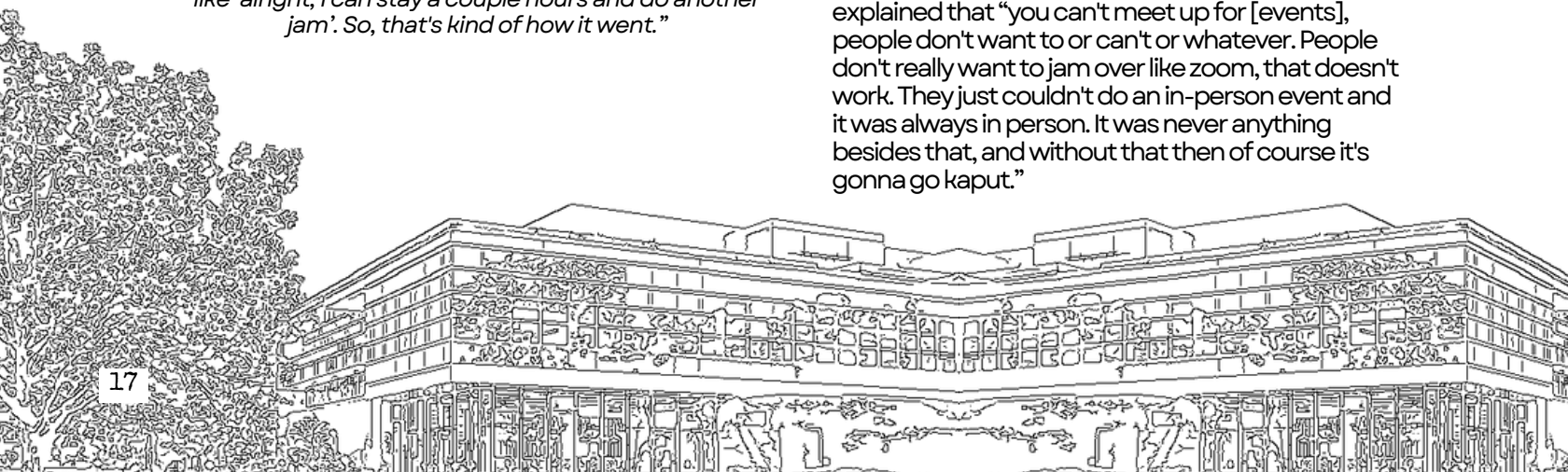
"I was a member of the other music club before I joined Harmonix—this is a neat story. I'm not sure if they're still around, but essentially with that club they would just set up some instruments in the [Fireplace Lounge], which is right above the [Blind Duck Pub]. You know, we'd just jam out and stuff like that; rotate instruments, rotate solos, things like that. And one of the guys, his name is Bogdan, I was just chatting with him and he suggested I could try out Harmonix because that's coming up. So, I met a drummer at the UTM Music Club, his name's Adrian. We kind of jammed there and then Bogdan introduced me to Adrian and I was just chatting with Adrian for hours at the bar before we just went to the Harmonix event, the first one [of the year], and we just jammed together over there. It was pretty sick. It was just like a spur of the moment thing, you know, it's like 'alright, I can stay a couple hours and do another jam'. So, that's kind of how it went."

When asked about Harmonix's goals, Nicholas responded that "I think it was mainly just to celebrate music and just have a fun time in an organized way where we could just perform songs," likening Harmonix's events to being more like parties. Giving credit to the passionate community, he mentioned that Harmonix's executives "managed to promote and secure people to come in for an event whenever it seemed right...they did their due diligence to actually run the thing". Nicholas also spoke fondly of his fellow musicians, stating that "it was cool that people would show at the [UTM Music Club], there was a lot going on there. The jams are pretty consistent too, like once a week. That was awesome. You can't ask for much better than that, right? I met singers, saxophone players, guitarists, drummers; and got a lot of good connections. One of the guitarists, I still meet up and jam with him whenever we can."

However, there was less to be said of support from UofT. Nicholas mentioned that there was virtually no influence from the St. George campus to UTM, as well as noting that he knew nothing about the Scarborough Campus' musical endeavors. "Weirdly enough though, this is kind of interesting, there were people from McMaster coming to Harmonix. Can you believe that? I don't know how or why, but they just did. I mean, it implies that our [music club] was good enough to have people come to us, so that's cool. [Harmonix] managed to get eyes and ears from there to here so but not vice versa, so that's interesting."

When discussing how UofT could possibly support music at UTM, Nicholas suggested having more accessibility for playing music through designated locations and more access to instruments. UTM's only designated area for music over the last few years has been a room with a standup piano only accessible to students living on campus. When asked how we as students could improve the music scene on campus, Nicholas offered a simple solution. "Be friendly. Talk to people. One of my [current] best friends, he was sitting on the floor on his laptop watching an Adam Neely video, and I just went over to that, pointed, and was like 'do you play bass or something like that?', and then we became really good friends. Just kind of get yourself out there. That's what I would say. You don't necessarily need a club. A club is great, but you can also do it yourself. Just meet people, talk to people about music."

In spring of 2020, both UTM Music Club and Harmonix saw an abrupt end due to lockdown restrictrions. Harmonix made one last effort to maintain activity by starting a Discord server in October that same year, but it wasn't meant to be. When asked about Harmonix's demise, Nicolas explained that "you can't meet up for [events], people don't want to or can't or whatever. People don't really want to jam over like zoom, that doesn't work. They just couldn't do an in-person event and it was always in person. It was never anything besides that, and without that then of course it's gonna go kaput."



And so began a period of darkness in the recent history of music at UTM.

Harmonix's spiritual successor from rose the ashes of the past music clubs thanks to the efforts of Maha
Khalid, the founder and current president of the new Harmonix. Maha had some experience with the music clubs at UTM pre-pandemic, though she couldn't get involved citing the pressures of first-year life science.

"I would hear about the music clubs and passing. You know the club fair in the beginning of the year? I remember going and seeing the team music clubs like tabling side by side and like oh, this is so cool. This is actually really funny because they had a drop-in event and I was like, 'I'm going to go to this', but I could not figure out where that room was for my life. I walked around maybe all of [the William G. Davis building] looking for this room and I could not find it, and eventually I'm like, 'OK, well, I'm just going to go home at this point'. That was the extent of involvement I had with Harmonix before the pandemic, then things went online and I'm like 'OK, every club has just officially died'."

Maha's primary inspiration for starting a music club after the pandemic came from a combination of observing the creative hobbies people would pick up during the lockdown and noticing a lack of accessibility for creative output given the lack of music clubs. With that in mind, Harmonix initially began as C.L.U.B., with the intent to engage not only with music but with all forms of creative output. The decision to rename the club came from the UTMSU club coordinator. Along with the name, Harmonix ended up inheriting a variety of equipment from different sources, including a master's student who returned some instruments after noticing Harmonix had started up once again.

"At the start, we had our ups and downs. We had a lot of numbers, then we had none, and then we had one, and then we had none. I did have people that wanted to help out, did their best, put their efforts in, but things didn't work out. That's OK, starting up a club is a lot of effort and time and I understand that, as a university student, not everyone has that time, right? I started [Harmonix] up mostly with my friend Daphne, who is our VP Finance. She helped me really get into the nitty gritty while I was doing all the paperwork and all that. Not the biggest [exec] team, but a very passionate team I think is the most important thing. I love my little exec team. Everyone is great. We are all passionate students who want to make a very supportive musical environment."

Harmonix's best event so far in their relatively short history was their charity coffee house held this past November. "Harmonix x SickKids" raised over $800 and had an attendance of over 100 packed into UTM's Blind Duck Pub. "We actually had maybe like five or six students that were from [UTSG] come perform, which was super cool." Speaking of Harmonix events in general, Maha says her favorite part of them is "seeing students show up. I like when they come play the instruments and everyone just looks kind of happy being able to do something that they enjoy. This is what I put all that effort in for and I'm seeing it firsthand. One of my favorite parts about that is that it's usually strangers that are meeting for the first time and then they start improvising and next thing you know everyone's having a great time and I'm just like 'yes, the universal language is doing its thing'. That's probably my favorite part."

When asked about how the music scene could be improved at UTM, Maha acknowledged that it seemed to be doing well enough considering the lack of music department but suggested that things could be improved with more awareness across all three campuses of there being a music community, noting, like Nicholas, that she knew virtually nothing about what was happening at UTSC. When asked how we as students could improve the music scene, Maha suggested that more active involvement and encouragement in going to music-related events would create a stronger community at UTM.

Speaking about how Harmonix plans to move forward, Maha states that her priority, aside from promoting acceptance across all skillsets, is to "create a stable foundation for the club in the instance that, let's say, pandemic strikes and everything goes online again, if someone wants to start up the club again, they know how to do it. It wasn't impossible, but having all that laid out now, I would hope that it would be of use in the future if it needs to be. Not to say everything needs to stay the same, but if it can be helpful to creating that again, then I hope that it can do that. I mean, we got a lot of support from external people with their equipment and things like that, so we want to see if we can get more things maybe from local music shops, things like that, just to give students more access to instruments and equipment, things that they may not necessarily have. Being able to offer that would be great, it's just a matter of getting that stuff and getting those resources. So yeah, the direction I'm going in is to make that strong base, and then we can do a lot more with that."

Ultimately, the ability to pursue and grow our passions lies in our hands, as shown by the sentiments of both past and present Harmonix executives. You don't need to build a club from the ground up to build a passionate group with shared interests. As for Harmonix, the twists and turns that laid them to rest and brought them back from the dead show us that music always finds a way. "Obviously, there's always room for improvement," Maha acknowledges, "but with time and effort our team will do the very best to achieve that." As for us students, we must keep both the community and our passions thriving, and, as Nicholas' closing remarks tell us, just "keep playing music".

THE NEW TOURING REALITY

BY ETHAN SEET

Surrounded by a haze of twinkling synths, thundering bass guitar and the whine of a hurdy-gurdy, Animal Collective take the stage of the Danforth Music Hall ready to turn a page. The group's first show in Toronto in over two and a half years, it is also one of their first opportunities to play songs from their excellent 2022 album Time Skiffs to a Canadian Audience. Time Skiffs, a project which reads both as a familiar showcase of the group's talents and an affirmation of the band's forward-thinking mindset, arrives six years after Animal Collective's previous studio record and is their first in roughly ten to feature contributions from all members. As I watch their set in awe, I get the sense that I'm getting the chance to witness not only the comeback of a talented group of musicians, but also a small piece of the return of live music in the city after years of brutal COVID-era doldrums. Animal Collective's European fans would not have the same opportunity.

"For this tour we were looking at an economic reality that simply does not work and is not sustainable," the band explained a few weeks after the Danforth show in an instagram post announcing the cancellation of their 2022 shows overseas. My friends and I thought the announcement was unthinkable for an experienced touring group like Animal Collective, especially given the amount of preparation and practice they clearly had gone through to create a show experience like the one we had been to in Toronto.

Animal Collective's tour cancellation is indicative of a larger trend in the music industry where artists returning from touring hiatus have found unexpected challenges in the post-pandemic landscape. Several notable artists have had to cancel tours due to newfound obstacles which have made touring considerably more difficult than it was before COVID-19. Upon returning from the COVID era, artists have found the damage to the economy from both the pandemic and other geopolitical events to prove just as challenging as the restrictions which came before. Animal Collective specifically cited increased transportation costs and rising inflation as among the most important reasons why the European tour was canceled.

The increased economic constraints on touring places a burden on musicians that ultimately impacts their wellbeing and ability to continue pursuing art as a career. Animal Collective's tour cancellation response specifically put emphasis on the fact that attempting to continue the European tour would significantly affect both the group's mental and physical health. Especially after the band stated that they had already lost money during the North American leg of the tour when members contracted the virus, the amplified risk of something similar occurring amidst economic difficulty in Europe makes the cancellation announcement all too obvious. The absence of restrictions does not necessarily mean an immediate return to touring is healthy or viable.

No artist seems to have understood this better than Santigold, who, like Animal Collective, canceled her fall show dates last September due to unsafe touring conditions and poor economic prospects. In her explanation for the cancellations, Santigold said that the hustle to resume touring quickly resulted in an environment which left her anxious and fatigued.

Her response also included criticisms of other systemic industry issues which exacerbate the problems artists are facing while touring, such as decreases in pay from the mass adoption of streaming services. In particular, her criticisms of increased industry emphasis on artist marketing helps illustrate why artists have been accepting the burdens and economic losses of tours in the first place. "The only incentive [is] to stay in the public eye," she says. In an industry where fierce competition encourages artists to prioritize their visibility to consumers, the idea of becoming lost or forgotten in the sea of tour announcements will lead artists to sacrifice their wellbeing for a chance to continue being seen as a viable touring act.

Santigold's criticisms of both current and historic music industry dysfunction parallel the worldwide outcry for better working conditions spurred on by the pandemic, given rising inflation and stagnating wages. Her experiences in the music industry demonstrate that the current bleak outlook many musicians have for the future is not only the result of COVID-related problems, but also pre-existing issues which have been uncovered and emphasized as musicians return to work. If the expectation is for artists to make do and juggle unsustainable industry demands while conditions continue to decline, fans should expect to see an increase in cancellations or outright hiatuses.

I hope that by raising awareness for issues that artists continuously speak out about, a better outcome can be reached for musicians who continue to record and perform. It's clear that solutions which require artists to "adapt" are only so useful before systemic change is required.

In the meantime, please help support the artists you care about.

(Photos: Myles Herod for Aesthetic Magazine)

Here's a wiser way to spend your $15 on a good weekend.

Aya Kobayashi

This all started when I held off seeing the Red Hot Chili Peppers with the Strokes and Thundercat live due to the exorbitant cost of their general admission tickets. Why do I, an unemployed university student with no source of income, have to fish out $800 just to see one of my favorite bands play for three measly hours?

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who thought this was crazy. Perhaps one of the richest and most powerful Swiftie in the world, AOC, also vocalized her qualms with the rapid surge in ticket prices lately. In a heated Twitter thread on the ills of music monopolization, she chastises Ticketmaster and the arbitrage bias that the service gives to ticket resellers.

"It's not just Ticketmaster, it's Live Nation. Live Nation has a complete monopoly. There used to be multiple companies but now, if you want to book out any major venue it's through LN and TicketM; they can inflate prices and screw over artists. For example, you have the whole Taylor Swift fiasco where she doesn't perform and there's no refund; everybody gets angry at her and she has to say "Literally, it's not me. I can't do anything about it right now because of this giant monopoly company."

Toronto's self-proclaimed *"Bargain Bin Lady Gaga,"* ***Feura***, comments as we discuss the fate of live music in a digitized, deregulated, and hyperconsumerist era of QR codes that could essentially become an ugly, distorted form of cryptocurrency in the financial framework of live music.

It's an easy, bandaid fix to point fingers at the artist and accuse them of letting the fame get to their heads, but in reality, price gouging is just one of the many ills of late-stage capitalism and its penchant to commodify everything inherently human in character. It's not just the price gouging that affects how we view live music; the economics of arbitrage opportunities have somewhat been a staple of how we as consumers decide when and what to buy or sell. While we suffer through the pains of FOMO due to high ticket prices, artists must feed into the glorified social media algorithm to make a name for themselves. In a sense, this entire marketed concept of authenticity that's often promoted on TikTok is a parasitic, neatly-wrapped product that continues to advertise itself to a generationally lost, hungry public willing to devour pretty much anything until the concept of the "self" is entirely eradicated. It's unfortunately the way things are as of late, and consumerism has been embedded into the very aspects of what once made art so human. There's simply nothing we can do about our world's giant identity crisis.

*"Labels don't have talent scouters anymore. They look at data analytics online, and they look at your little dot on the screen and go "Oh, this person has x amount of followers." The decisions they make into signing you into a label all depend on the number of followers you have, and I think that a lot of musicians get too caught up with TikTok/Instagram and forget about doing the live show because of this. Performance quality and actual performance talent have been in decline lately." —**Feura.***

While I—like many others who base their entire personality on the music that they listen to—mostly focus on the negative aspects of digitization and its impacts on the post-pandemic resurgence of live music, there's admittedly a silver lining to all of it that many sad fans and concertgoers often ignore. Just like Feura and Motel 67, many young musicians and small, local artists in the city are tired of suffering through an increasingly profit-driven, artificial "scene." The bigger problems that we are too occupied with tend to make us forget that there is still a real sense of live music around us—we're all just too busy being students, workers, and wage slaves to even realize it.

*"There's a big divide between what's developing organically and what's being farmed away," **Patrick**, **James** and **Kaiya** of **Motel 67** say upon telling me why they started their own music collective amidst such a competitive and growingly artificial scene. As the three sat down on a large couch amidst Zoom's grainy footage, it was easy to see the passion they held for their music and their organization. All three responded to each of my questions with an elegant air of pondering, sitting quietly as eloquence from experience and drive laced their thoughts. "The pandemic has made cities more divided, and we wanna bring back real scenes where it's about art. A lot of live shows stick to the script, then everyone goes home. With **Scratch**, we tried to put on an actual experience, and we don't want to make it feel like a chore." **Kaiya** then goes into detail about one of their first events, where they successfully attempted to mix live music with painting.*

*"I was talking to the owner of **Bar Orwell**, and she reminded me that local shows haven't increased with inflation for decades. People have been paying $10-15 forever. That price range to go out and see 3-4 bands play? That's a good time!"*

Noah of **Smol Audio Projects** says as he provides me with a unique and nuanced view of the mass monopolization of live music today. Like **Scratch Collective**, **Smol Audio Projects** was created to provide a platform for small, local Canadian artists while fostering a genuine, real sense of community and belonging. One of the many things about **Smol** that stood out to me was the fact that they hosted a free show with **Feura**, **Dream Crabs**, and **Shiv and the Carvers** at the **Bovine Sex Club** despite being a small, independent organization. Though I was unfamiliar with the acts at the time, attending the event has given me a perspective on why Noah and the entire **Smol Audio Projects** team sacrifice so much to do what they love.

"It's a big opportunity to give local artists more of a chance. It's too bad that that's [music monopolization] happening but it's the silver lining in it. It's bringing attention to smaller people. Live Nation can do whatever they want and there will still be space for smaller artists. You can literally just host a show somewhere; just find a space and figure out how you're gonna make it viable, and people love that!"
—Noah

And indeed, people *do*. It's a sense of community that no one can see in a big arena or a large concert hall like the Danforth. The acts that played were reachable within an arm's length, and for once, I had to remind myself that musicians shouldn't be a glorified presence on a pedestal. They're people—just like all of us, and no person has said it any better than **Not Dead Yet**, a veteran gig booker for hardcore music across North America.

"I always have thought for a long time that the most important music to listen to is to listen to the music made by people around you. Whether it's true or not, it's the most human form of hearing music. There's a certain need to celebrate music that represents where you're from, and that's my particular interest with local/DIY music."

Not Dead Yet (who wishes to remain unnamed for privacy reasons) was eating a sandwich during the phone call we had together while I tried my best to muffle the background noise at a busy coffee shop. Despite his rather lax approach, every single word from him carried significance—almost as if he had experienced battles between the commercialization of music and keeping the DIY scene as it is in Ontario.

*"There's a lot of big artists that make political statements, but that goes up there because people are okay with it. It's not challenging anything. Whereas independent local music can fundamentally alter how your neighbors see the world around you. **Community starts with the people beside you.**"*
—Not Dead Yet

The world isn't a lovely place. As we grow older, we become more jaded with all the duties and obligations imposed on us by a rigidly parasitic capitalist system that continues to chain us into a life of routine and eventual retirement. The least we can do is widen our perspectives and see the efforts that our community has put in place to ease the ills of the world. Instead of lamenting about a $300 ticket to see Blink-182, why don't you try and come check out a local bar and ask who's playing tonight? Who knows, you might find your new favorite band for $15 or less.

NATIONALIZE SPOTIFY

ZED HOFFMAN-WELDON

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In 2006, the music industry changed—and not for the better. That year, Spotify was founded as a way for record labels to out-compete piracy. Seventeen years later, Spotify is the largest music streaming service in the world. The corresponding increase in music's ease of access made a small group of artists fantastically wealthy at the same time as it decreased payouts of small acts, increasing barriers to entry in a market already hostile to new and independent musicians.

Ours is an era of corporate ascendance. Extended periods characterized by low interest rates and lax regulation elevated the economic and political might of major corporations to their zenith. Price gouging is rampant, personal information is unaccountably stolen, platforms exploit dependent creators.

WHAT IF, WITH SPOTIFY, WE FOUGHT BACK?

In 2021, the Union of Musicians and Allied workers was formed, in part to demand fair compensation from Spotify. Their demands include 1¢ per stream for artists. Unions are an essential part of action against corporate power and malfeasance, but suppose we were to dream bigger: If, we, as a society, were to use the vast economic and legal resources available to us to rectify the harm Spotify caused in the world, what would we do? What should we do?

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S UGLY MUG

WHY 1¢ PER STREAM? The number seems arbitrary, and musicians never made money unless they sacrificed a virgin to the devil to become rich and awesome, like that guy from Maroon-5. Certainly, the current arrangement bears a great number of similarities to past states of the music industry. A few leading musicians, through a combination of successful albums and lucrative tours, have become fantastically wealthy. The vast majority of musicians slave away in quiet obscurity, making a pittance. The ones lucky enough to be professionally trained may secure gigs as session musicians—the unsung heroes of every album you enjoy—but the vast majority pay the bills in other ways. This has always been the case: There are hundreds of thousands of groups like Clever Girl, a personal favourite who released a single album in 2018 and split; the members of Clever Girl were lucky and hardworking enough to become doctors, but most groups aren't so lucky. Even established musicians teeter on the edge of financial ruin. The COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for legendary bassist Bill Lasswell to continue his prolific touring and recording schedule, he retained ownership of his studio through crowdfunding. It cannot be denied that the music industry is—and has historically been tough for musicians.

There are, nevertheless, key differences between the current recording industry and the industry of the past.

First, audiences listen to a more varied mix of artists. In part because of services like Spotify, a process known as "audience fragmentation" has taken place in the music industry. Audience fragmentation means fewer people are tuned to the same sources. As recording and reproduction costs have lowered, it has become easier for audiences to access music that previously would have been expensive or difficult-to-find.12 That the popularity of current major artists is greater than the popularity of past artists is in some ways an illusion reflective of the underlying dynamic that the industry has expanded; more listeners, more markets, more ways of listening.

Second, "the pie" is bigger. More listeners means more money flowing into the industry. More record sales; more streams, as little as that means for artists; bigger tours.

These changes in the material composition of the music industry have translated into little change for music workers. More artists are getting listened to, and there is more money to go around, but a small group of artists still are the ones who reap major benefits. Others make decent livings touring, but, as always the vast majority make nothing; often quitting like Clever Girl. Clever Girl is a particularly interesting example: Their album No Drum and Bass in the Jazz Room is an instrumental math rock album, which, prior to 1999, would have precisely zero listeners. As of writing, No Drum and Bass in the Jazz Room has been streamed more than a million times. And, somehow, the artists still had to quit to become doctors. A million people listening to your album used to mean something financially.

This is a classic industrial trend: Improvements in technology lead both to greater labour productivity, but also to a greater ability for capitalists to steal workers' surplus-value.13 In other words, Spotify has both made the pie bigger, and involved more people in baking it; but the owners of the kitchen still get to eat it all.

The macroeconomic trends driving the music industry are interesting, but they don't explain where ¢1 per stream came from. Why not ¢.99 or ¢1.01? The Union of Musicians and Allied workers list of demands says, "it would take 786 streams to generate enough revenue to buy an average cup of coffee. To pay the median American monthly rent ($1,078) an artist needs to generate 283,684 recurring streams monthly [...] [1¢ per stream] would give artists a better chance at making a living from their art." It should be noted that these numbers assume the artist receives 100% of the revenue generated by their streams; usually, their record label takes between 50% and 80% of that revenue. Sorry to all those who were hoping that 1¢ per stream emerged from some kind of deductive mathematical model. Rather, it's a proposed industry standard which is defined in comparison to the current value, rather than a transcendental equilibrium. There's a convincing case to be made that it should be higher. The point of 1¢ per stream isn't that it's some kind of perfect-competition optimum, it's a proposal for Spotify to pay artists based on the value they generate, not based on what scheme makes Spotify and major labels the most money.

Complaints that the music industry have always been like this are wrong, but they're also morally perverse. Why is it a bad thing for musicians to be able to make a living? Even if it were the case that the music industry had always operated this way—which, as we saw above, isn't true— should it have operated that way? Defending the economic immiseration of hundreds of thousands of people for the benefit of a small number of massive media conglomerates is the definition of misplaced priorities. The largest music group in the world is Universal Music Group, which is a subsidiary of an even larger multinational company called Vivendi. Universal Music Group is the owner of multiple famous record labels, some of which have created billionaires on their own. UMG owns Geffen records,14 which made David Geffen a billionaire famous for throwing extravagant yacht parties and donating a building to UCLA. Daniel Ek, the founder and CEO of Spotify, is a billionaire; and Sean Parker is a billionaire. In an industry populated by some of the richest people in the world, the idea that musicians—the ones who paid for the gold which plates Daniel Ek's asshole—shouldn't be paid a fairer rate isn't just ridiculous, it's morally bankrupt.

A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Now that the moral rectitude of regulating Spotify has been established, there are a number of options for regulating Spotify: Legislate 1¢ per stream, introduce a publicly-owned competitor service, regulate the company as a private utility, or nationalize Spotify.

Legislating 1¢ per stream is the easiest solution from a regulatory standpoint. It has a number of advantages: It isn't complicated, it gets artists a fair rate, and the amount can be indexed to inflation to ensure Spotify must continue to pay artists fairly for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, this option has some problems. First, it's on shaky legal ground. The federal government has some power to regulate contracts between corporations and workers to ensure that those contracts aren't predatory, but less power to regulate terms of business between corporations. Spotify would undoubtedly fight any such law to the Supreme Court, if necessary; that Court is unlikely to return a favourable ruling for the regulation. Second, it's difficult to enforce. Individual artists are unlikely to be able to have the resources necessary to sue Spotify in the event of wage theft. This is the more important point: Certainly, groups like Universal Music Group will be able to ensure they are receiving 1¢ per stream, but small independent labels and unaffiliated artists will have to sue rather than only threatening to sue, and Spotify will be able to bury them in legal fees. Legislating 1¢ per stream is a good solution, but it's worth looking at other options.

One of those options is to introduce a public competitor to Spotify. A "public option," as such businesses are often called, is an entity controlled by a state which competes with private companies in the market. You might remember the 2020 Democratic Party primary in which an overgrown rat15 proposed a public option for healthcare. In healthcare, there are a number of reasons to believe that a public option would outcompete private healthcare providers, in particular its ability to offer significantly lower rates to consumers. In music streaming, such an option is unlikely to succeed. A key difference between industrial markets and information markets is that industrial markets operate on "economies of scale," whereas information markets operate on "economies of networks." Essentially, this means that when more people use a digital service, the value of that service to any individual user increases.16 In the case of Apple, benefits include iMessage between Apple users. For Spotify, the ability to easily share playlists, and songs; to create "blends;" see friend listening activity, and other social features are all network benefits. The ultimate effect is a tendency toward monopoly in information markets. Because it's better to be connected to a larger network than a smaller one, people tend to join the largest network they can. It's therefore unlikely that, even with lower rates, a public option would effectively compete with Spotify: Their network just wouldn't be big enough.

A third option is to regulate Spotify like a private utility. Utilities, which provide essentials from which consumers cannot easily "opt-out" and are geographically located, are regulated quite tightly when they are privately owned. In particular, utilities tend to develop "natural monopolies," where, due to high barriers to entry for building—for example—a parallel water service network in a given area, they gain monopolistic control over the market for their service in a given area and can change inefficiently high rates. Consumer protection regulations ensure utilities only raise rates slightly over their equilibrium level, such that the utility continues to make a profit and remains in the market, but doesn't engage in usury. This is the way Canada regulated major airlines like AirCanada when it privatized them. AirCanada could operate as a private entity if, and only if, it continued to provide flights to underserved areas like Halifax and Newfoundland. Proponents of this approach argue that private companies are more innovative than sluggish crown corporations, and they are more effective at finding cost-effective ways to satisfy the requirements imposed by the government. Note, though, that this is more administratively complicated than simply legislating 1¢ per stream, and many of the regulations would be extraneous. For example, utility regulations often have provisions ensuring all (paying) consumers are guaranteed access. Spotify doesn't currently deny any paying consumers access, and it's difficult to conceptualize a scenario in which it would do so. In terms of whether AirCanada and similar companies provide a more effective service than public companies, evidence is extremely mixed. The legacy of utility privatization globally is complicated at best17 and it seems to be the case that publicly-owned utilities are superior to private ones in the instances where the government has the capacity to effectively run them.18 Utility-style regulation as a solution is passable, but essentially just a more administratively complex version of legislating 1¢ per stream.

NATIONALIZE SPOTIFY!

Stand for the flag; kneel for the hammer and sickle. The final—and best—option is to nationalize Spotify. Nationalizing the service retains many of the benefits it currently possesses, in particular network benefits. Operating Spotify as a "crown corporation" has several benefits. Obviously, lack of profit motive and increased legal might would allow the company to pay artists essentially any rate it likes, certainly including 1¢ per stream. Unlike a public option, Spotify would retain its network benefits. Non-military branches of the United States federal government are generally subject to more stringent rules with respect to citizens' personal information than private corporations are, so both a public option or a nationalized Spotify would be legally barred from selling consumer data to advertisers;

without a profit motive, why would they want to?

The most compelling benefit for operating Spotify as a state-owned entity is that Spotify controls access to the legal music market. Daniel Ek is right about the following: If Spotify were to vanish tomorrow, people wouldn't return to physical albums; they would return to piracy. If an artist wants their music to be heard, they must engage with Spotify, like it or not. The exceptions—like Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, or Taylor Swift—are artists so wealthy and established that if the entire world became deaf tomorrow they could continue to live comfortably. It's disturbing that a society is prepared to leave *music itself* in the hands of a few inestimably large, unaccountable corporations.

Arguments against nationalization usually take the following form: "Nationalization creates bad companies." There's a popular perception that corporations are maximally light, agile, and adaptable; while the institutional machinery of government approaches infinite sluggishness. This perception is not entirely incorrect: The fact that states are a form of mandatory association means that, once established, a state is considerably more difficult to dislodge than any individual corporation, with which association is usually voluntary. Put simply, it's easier for a company to go bankrupt than it is for a state to collapse, so companies are forced by circumstances to adapt more often than states.

Note the scope conditions of this argument. Private corporations are likely to be more adaptable than a state in those cases where association with the corporation is largely optional. There is a reason that Scotland renationalized their rail network. When important pieces of social life depend on interacting with a particular corporation, in that case, Scottish Rail, nationalization has the potential to significantly improve service provision, in particular cost to the consumer.

What does this mean for nationalizing Spotify? For artists, association with Spotify isn't optional. For consumers, it very much is: There are an enormous number of Spotify users, but just less than a third of U.S. residents use Spotify. The question is, "what is the other option?" There are a competitor music streaming services, which have significantly smaller market shares than Spotify, but the true alternative to a streaming service is (usually unauthorized) music uploads on YouTube and piracy. If consumers have one good, legal way to interact with a certain industry, it suggests that mechanism is a good target for nationalization.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE CATCH...

"...and that was Catch-22." Spotify isn't going to be nationalized. As much as the author can dream about the day when Pete Seeger rises from the dead to sweep the United States Presidential election as a Marxist candidate with Vice President Björk, we live on Earth. Nationalization of Spotify is what John Rawls called "realistically utopian."19 If, instead of realistically utopian, we were realistic, what should be done? The answer is simple: Support the Union of Musicians and Allied workers. Sign their demands. If you want to do more, they accept donations. Rashida Tlaib currently has a resolution which would introduce a streaming royalty, a step toward legislating 1¢ per stream. If you can vote in the United States, call or email your representative and tell them to support that resolution. Inevitably, there will be more protests. Prepare to make noise.

AMBIVALENT SPINS

THE UNSUSTAINABLE REIGNITION OF VINYL

BY ANDREW YOO

An industry once characterized by pretentious hippies that gatekept the vinyl as an apparatus of superior sound to streaming has come to a screeching halt. Demographics have widened, pressing plant technology has evolved, and market projections confirm vinyl to be the ultimate in-vogue hobby. But is it worth it? Beyond the pretty colours and outright gorgeous patterns, is it worth it? Beyond the supposedly heightened sound quality, is it worth it? After the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of TikTok, vinyl records have become a catalyst for positive socializing and community. However, its embodiment of grotesque consumerist excess may be on a trajectory to become unsustainable.

To preface, with a collection 170 records strong, I am not somehow morally above the dilemma of unethical consumption under capitalism. The sudden rebirth of vinyl is uncontrollable as it has become too big to fail but refuses to stabilize. After years of significant recent growth in the face of a depressive turn of the millennia, vinyl has exploded into the mainstream alongside the subsequent rise in CD and cassette. The novelty of physicality and ownership is finally viable again while we endure unreliable and online- dependent platform Apple Music.

We've become apocalyptic, anachronistic, and untrustworthy of our service providers; in fear of another Rogers outage, we have normalized just picking up one more record for a possibly offline future. Instead of attempting to be your psychiatrist though, I acknowledge that vinyl is a highly personalized hobby with differing motives for collection. A hobby that corporate labels have already optimized, gamified, and made sure will succeed based on unimaginable overabundance, precise marketing, and consumer competition.

Pretty colours! Cool variants! 5, no, 6, no 49 CD, cassette, and vinyl variants of Midnights by Taylor Swift? It makes a fun little clock if you collect 4 different variants, and oh, what's this? A metal clock hand sold separately? Don't mind if I do! There are only so many ways to reinvent the disc before it becomes excessive, but labels know that FOMO will run profit. Besides the widely available and understandable indie store exclusives, there are, (get ready for this) ahem ahem: country-specific, big-box chain, Japanese obi-stripped, website-specific, numbered, picture discs, 180g, audiophile, Spotify fans-first, vinyl subscriptions, signed, and believe it or not... Even more! Hell, there's even an entire day dedicated to buying once-in-a-lifetime variants that, more likely than not, end up in the satanic market of price scalping. In the endless maximization of variants, there exists a deceptive connection with artists through ownership of a limited edition item, inducing an ironic disconnect. Signatures can be faked with Autopen machines, and big-label artists aren't exactly shipping records out at their local post office, so what's new?

To clarify, I do not blame artists for their increased participation and simultaneous disassociation from vinyl, as it's often forced by the label or by the artist to recoup contractually displaced income. It is truly rare to find artists like Conan Gray or James Blake that intrinsically tie their work to the medium and its specificities. Rather, fan culture has been figured out, and labels have perfected the money machine of parasocial dedication. Overwhelming and limited streams of merchandising ensure jealousy and competition to display one's authentic enjoyment of an artist's songs.

Getting down to brass tax, vinyl is toxic. No, you don't have to throw them out because they're excreting a silent killer gas, however, they are anything but carbon neutral. The mass usage of PVC, a plastic medium that is unsafe to recycle and can release chloride gas when heated, has become necessitated under large and diverse pressing orders. An industry that had struggled to keep up with demand pre-COVID is now inundated with 500,000 copies of 30 by Adele floating on store shelves. Labels like Loma Vista, despite platforming talents like Soccer Mommy and Ghost, have pressed 17 variants, as seen with the release of Melt My Eyez See Your Future by Denzel Curry. Thus, not only do smaller artists with considerably fewer resources miss their chance at the press, but the environmental toll continues to rise at an insurmountable rate.

Attempts to combat vinyl waste exist in eco-vinyls, a recycling process that reuses scraps to produce unique amalgamations of variants. Companies like the soundtrack-centric Mondo press eco-vinyl after initial runs as an equally valuable variant. However, for every eco-forward company like Mondo, 10 labels demand mass production.

An industry that prides itself on decentralized pressing plants falters under an inability to stray from PVC and agree upon sustainable alternatives. With an inability for consumers to judge the enviro-impact based on packaging or pressing plant exists a thick, opaque layer that prevents us from instituting change.

It's not fun to hear the thing you like to collect is unethical, but what isn't unethical anymore? Trust me, consciously shitting on the hobby I started when I was 14 isn't amusing to me either. Therefore, I will continue to live in denial and remind myself there is good that comes from the record community.

Nothing will beat the feeling of record store-hopping, learning about new albums from friends, or reminiscing on albums you listened to. The desire to spend an entire cheque is always present as I dawn upon Sonic Boom's rarities or find that obscure one-time listen at Dead Dog Records. Not to say the pretentiousness of record collecting is gone, but long are the days of millennials staring you down for not looking at the Finnish industrial-experimental-folk-punk-rock section like they used to. The introduction of Gen-Z into the market, while undeniably expediting unsustainability, has refreshed a medium that was bound to fail.

"THE COMMITMENT TO GROOVES IN A PLASTIC DISC IS ASTOUNDING"

Communities like the "Vinyl Chat" Discord function as an all-in-one hub for notifications on releases and communal showing off, instilling a sense of community that feels wholly unique to vinyl's excessive consumerist revival. Logging on to see if anyone bought the same record or has a specific variant I had been fiending for, it's so gratifying to be a part of. However, the backbone of vinyl revival has to be archive and marketplace Discogs. As an all-encompassing site containing over 15 million music releases, Discogs is the most comprehensive index and indicator of vinyl value. Despite the intrinsic monetary connection associated with the community being mildly reminiscent of hypebeast culture, it differs in its welcoming and non-judgemental nature - you won't be clowned for owning a bootleg, that's for sure. The commitment to grooves in a plastic disc is astounding, a testament to the newly discovered mass dedication to cultural preservation and the significance of music as a socializing mechanism.

Vinyl is a medium that is undoubtedly satisfying. From the release of the tone lock to dropping the needle on the record, it's a learned motion that is clunky but worth every penny. However, it is imperative to remind ourselves that vinyl is a re-emerging industry, one that is being crushed under the overambition by uninformed and apathetic executives. Despite the original gramophone being patented in 1887, we keep finding new ways to increase the medium's limits. The industry is bursting at the seams, but by the time we realize that its production is harmful, we will just be repeating the same cycle of folly until we all become cynical pricks that submit to the reproducing dogma of capitalism.

Or, we could all just buy a nice little eco-vinyl now and then? Maybe?

Jokes aside, I am not trying to stop you from buying records, and it would be disingenuous for me to try. On the day I've written this sentence, I will have picked up Nas' King's Disease II on orange/red marble and Denzel Curry's Imperial in a black/gold splatter on clear. However, the unassuming, underdog image of vinyl is starting to fade as it transforms into another avenue for unnecessary environmental waste in the name of convenience and pandering. It's time to start questioning the long-term viability of uncontrolled pressing and analyzing the disproportionate power structures that exist in the music industry that facilitates this excess.

But with ALL of this in mind, I'm gonna play the Record Store Day exclusive, Peppa's Adventures: The Album on hot pink wax because that is something I, for some reason, own. Happy spinning!

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Aya Kobayashi - Musical Molotovs, Two Approaches to Listening to Music, Music Finds a Way, A Wiser Way to Spend Your $15, and Nationalize Spotify

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